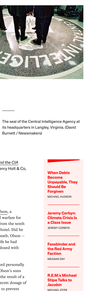

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United States

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The True Story of MK-Ultra and the CIA Mad Scientist

BY

ALEX DE JONG

In its search for the perfect mind-control technique, the CIA carried out horrifying tests on unwitting humans. The story of programs like MK-Ultra is a chilling look at how the US government turned its own citizens into guinea pigs — and destroyed lives in the process.

The seal of the Central Intelligence Agency at its headquarters in Langley, Virginia. (David Burnett / Newsmakers)

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Review of *Poisoner in Chief: Sidney Gottlieb and the CIA Search for Mind Control* by Stephen Kinzer (Henry Holt & Co, 2019).

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On November 28, 1953, Frank Olson, a scientist researching biological warfare for the US army, fell to his death from the tenth floor of the Manhattan Statler hotel. Did he jump or was he pushed? Nine days before his death, Olson — who talked about leaving his job and told his wife he had made “a terrible mistake” — had been secretly dosed with LSD by a CIA operative.

Over twenty years later, US president Gerald Ford personally met with Olson’s family to offer his apologies. Olson’s sons are convinced that their father’s death was not the result of a nervous breakdown, possibly triggered by the secret dosage of LSD; rather, they believe that he was murdered to prevent him from exposing secrets.

The story of Frank Olson inspired a Netflix TV series by Errol Morris but his death is still surrounded by mysteries. Olson’s work had brought him into contact with the man who would secretly drug him: Sidney Gottlieb, head of one of the most infamous projects in CIA history, MK-Ultra.

In *Poisoner in Chief: Sidney Gottlieb and the CIA Search for Mind Control*, Stephen Kinzer tells the incredible story of a man who saw himself as a noble patriot and an explorer, while destroying people in the United States and abroad.

A Misguided Patriot?

Gottlieb was born in 1918 as the son of Hungarian-Jewish immigrants. A chemist by training, Gottlieb was recruited for secret US research into chemical warfare. As Kinzer describes, the United States started researching the use of bacteria and chemicals for military use during the Second World War.

The way Kinzer tells the story, Gottlieb was itching to contribute his skills to this research. He had wanted to join the war effort but was refused because of his club foot. According to Kinzer, Gottlieb felt indebted to the country that provided a safe home for his parents and made his academic education possible.

The United States was not the only country researching new warfare techniques. Nazi scientists also worked on chemical weapons, infamously experimenting on prisoners for their research. An unknown number of such scientists — who according to the Nuremberg criteria should have been punished for crimes against humanity after 1945 — received a new life in the United States in return for information.

Whenever a scientist had a “blemished” past, as Kinzer observes, US officials rewrote his biography, systematically expunging “references to membership in the SS, collaboration with the Gestapo, abuse of slave laborers and experiments on human subjects.” This was Operation Paperclip — named after the paperclips used to mark the files of the scientists that were brought over to the United States (over seven hundred in total).

Nazi war criminals were not the only source of US knowledge. Japanese scientists who had worked with Unit 731, the secret chemical and biological warfare research unit of the Imperial Japanese Army, also benefited from secret deals. The history of Unit 731 is even less transparent than that of its Nazi equivalents. What we do know is the stuff of nightmares. Unit 731 subjected prisoners to vivisection and organ removal without anesthesia to study the effects of various diseases on humans.

Operation Sea Spray

Kinzer describes how, in the context of the Cold War, US officials concluded that such research had produced knowledge that might “prove decisive in a future war.” Rather than winding down after the war, the US biological and chemical research project grew. US officials fixated on the notion that the Soviets were ahead of the United States in developing new forms of warfare.

This justified experiments on US citizens as well. In 1950, scientists carried out a large test in which supposedly harmless but traceable germs would be released into a US city. They chose San Francisco, reasoning that its chronic fog would disguise germ clouds. During Operation Sea Spray, a Navy ship sprayed a bacteria into the air for six days along the coast of San Francisco. In the days that followed, eleven people checked into hospitals, and one person died.

Although it hadn’t proved to be as harmless as they anticipated, the researchers deemed the experiment a success. It proved to their satisfaction that “effective dosages can be produced over relatively large areas.”

Gottlieb’s own interest was different, however. Instead of looking for ways to poison large groups, he was fascinated by the idea that chemicals could be used to control a person’s mind. In secret prisons across Europe and Asia, prisoners were subjected to attempts at “brainwashing.” Kinzer cites one study:

> In 1951 a team of CIA scientists led by Dr. Gottlieb flew to Tokyo … four Japanese suspected of working for the Russians were secretly brought to a location where the CIA doctors injected them with a variety of depressants and stimulants … under relentless questioning, they confessed to working for the Russians. They were taken out into Tokyo Bay, shot and dumped overboard.

In the following years, one drug became central to Gottlieb’s work: LSD. Originally synthesized in 1938, its hallucinogenic properties first became apparent to scientists in the forties. Gottlieb was convinced that LSD could be used to manipulate individuals, to make captured spies confess their secrets, and even to rewrite their personalities.

Gottlieb was not alone in thinking this. During the war in Korea, US establishment circles were shocked by instances of US soldiers going over to the North Korean side and denouncing US war crimes. The only possible explanation, US intelligence concluded, was that Communists had perfected brainwashing techniques. The 1962 movie *The Manchurian Candidate* popularized this idea further with its story of a Communist plot and a brainwashed US soldier.

Human Guinea Pigs

As with their fixation on supposed Soviet advances in bacteriological and chemical warfare, the fear of Communist brainwashing skills in US intelligence circles drove them to break their own laws. The CIA needed human guinea pigs, but Korean prisoners of war and suspected Communist spies provided only a limited supply. Gottlieb proved resourceful in finding new victims.

Soon after launching the program that would become infamous as MK-Ultra, Gottlieb came into contact with Harris Isbell, director of research at the Addiction Research Center in Lexington, Kentucky. Officially a hospital for people with drug addictions, this center lay under the joint authority of the Bureau of Prisons and the Public Health Service, and “functioned more like a prison.” Most of its inmates were extremely marginalized, powerless African Americans. That made them perfect test subjects. As Kinzer writes:

> The CIA needed a place to test dangerous and possibly addictive drugs: Isbell had a large number of drug-users in no position to complain. From the early 1950s onward, the Agency shipped LSD, with any number of other potentially dangerous narcotics, to Kentucky to be tested on human guinea pigs.

This was only the beginning. Not satisfied with the Kentucky research, MK-Ultra branched further out. In the mid-fifties, CIA operatives took note of the work of Ewen Cameron, president of the American Psychological Association and the Canadian Psychiatric Association.

Cameron drew their attention with experiments in which he enclosed patients in small cells, put them in a drug-induced coma, and subjected them to endless repetition of recorded phrases. Cameron was looking for techniques that would enable him to, as he put it, “re-pattern” individuals, changing their attitudes and beliefs. Patients who came to Cameron for help became his unwitting test subjects instead.

The CIA funded and protected Cameron, who carried out tests that — according to a review conducted decades later — had “no therapeutic validity whatsoever” and were even “comparable to Nazi medical atrocities.” To explain Cameron’s actions, there is no need to consider misguided patriotism or Cold War fears as motivations. He was simply a sadist who used a scientific cover to break and traumatize people.

“Pretty Good Stuff, Brudder!”

By the mid-1950s, the CIA was subsidizing research by numerous leading psychologists and psych-pharmacologists. Many of them were not aware of where their funding came from. Research was conducted at respected hospitals and universities such as MIT, Stanford, and John Hopkins. Often the test subjects did not know what they were going to be subjected to — a clear violation of research ethics.

Some experiments were non-coercive, even attractive. One series of experiments involved giving LSD to student volunteers. The volunteers were so fascinated by their psychedelic experiences that doctors and nurses signed up to try it themselves. In an ironic twist of history, the CIA helped popularize the drug that was so important in the sixties counterculture.

But Gottlieb was still no closer to his dream of a drug that could control minds. In New York and San Francisco, he ran operations in which civilians received drugs without their knowledge and were then observed for their reactions. In what was informally called Operation Midnight Climax, Gottlieb worked together with agents from the Federal Bureau of Narcotics to set up a safe house in San Francisco.

“At Gottlieb’s direction,” writes Kinzer, Federal Bureau of Narcotics agent George Hunter White “assembled a group of prostitutes whose job it would be to bring their clients to the ‘pad’ and dose them with LSD while he watched and recorded their reactions.” White profited from the covered nature of the operation to satisfy his own urges. Toward the end of his life in 1975, White wrote a letter to Gottlieb thanking him for the opportunities the CIA had granted him:

> I was a very minor missionary, actually a heretic, but I toiled wholeheartedly in the vineyards because it was fun, fun, fun. Where else could a red-blooded American boy lie, kill, cheat, steal, rape and pillage with the sanction and blessing of the All-Highest? Pretty good stuff, Brudder!

The Man Who Stared at Goats

Despite all this, MK-Ultra never yielded the results Gottlieb hoped for. The CIA began winding down the project in the late sixties and stopped it altogether a few years later. The fact that its existence became common knowledge stems from a brief period in the mid-seventies of somewhat increased democratic scrutiny of CIA operations.

In 1974, the *New York Times* reported on illegal domestic CIA activities. The US Congress set up several commissions to investigate such allegations, such as the famous inquiry headed by Frank Church. Kinzer describes the tug-of-war between officials who sought to use such investigations as an alibi and the pressure for meaningful probes into illegal activity.

In the early seventies, Gottlieb had retired from the CIA. When he was outed as the man behind MK-Ultra a few years later and summoned before a Senate Commission, he brokered a deal that saved him from juridical prosecution. Gottlieb quietly lived out the rest of his years, raising goats in his rural house in Virginia. He died in 1999.

Irrational and Criminal

In *Poisoner in Chief*, individuals, not larger social forces, take center stage. The result is a chronicle of bizarre criminals and crooks such as Gottlieb and George Hunter White, and of the harm they caused.

Parts of the book are surreal. Anecdotes vary from horrifying — in one experiment, mentally handicapped children were fed cereal laced with uranium and radioactive calcium — to merely amusing, such as the time when CIA operatives supposedly implanted a listening device in a cat, but forgot that cats do not listen to instruction (it walked away during a test in a park).

But what enabled people like Gottlieb to do what they did? Kinzer’s explanation of Gottlieb’s motivation only goes so far. The book shows that years of costly experimentation never brought any results that even pointed to the possibility of *Manchurian Candidate*–style brainwashing. But instead of concluding they were chasing a white rabbit, CIA scientists persisted.

Gottlieb’s apparent untouchable status looks even stranger when considering his supposed successes. To explain his influence in the CIA, Kinzer describes Gottlieb’s involvement in projects that brought him prestige. But Gottlieb’s “success stories” were almost all failures, such as failed attempts to assassinate the Chinese foreign minister Zhou Enlai, Fidel Castro, or the Congolese independence leader Patrice Lumumba (Lumumba was murdered before Gottlieb’s plan could be put into effect). Gottlieb’s career in destroying lives is a startling example of bureaucratic irrationality, showing how without democratic oversight, secret projects can take on a life of their own.

Kinzer gives particular credit to CIA director William Colby (1973–76) for the partial exposure of this madness. But Colby acted in a much wider context shaped by the Anti-War Movement, Watergate, and revelations such as the Pentagon Papers. There was a widespread distrust of institutions like the CIA and popular pressure for accountability. It is no coincidence that with the decline of these movements in the late seventies, any kind of accountability was once again curtailed.

With the “war on terror,” the CIA and other intelligence agencies won unprecedented freedom to operate. More recently, in the era of Trump, we have even seen attempts to re-brand the CIA as a kind of rational, knowledgeable, and benevolent arm of the US state. Kinzer’s book on Gottlieb and MK-Ultra serves as a useful reminder of the rotten nature of the imperial spy masters.

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